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TENNYSON IN THE ISLE OF WIGHT.

BY WILLIAM H. RIDEING.

THE Isle of Wight is not what it was when Tennyson came to Farringford with his young wife and child in 1853. Then it was little known to the outer world, and it was too inaccessible for the holiday-makers and the business men, who now make it a home, and impart to it some of the prosaic and unlovely qualities of a London suburb.

While he was at Bonchurch he had heard of Farringford as a place which was both beautiful and far from the haunts of men, and, with his wife, he went to see it one November evening, crossing the Solent in a row-boat, when "one dark heron flew over the sea, backed by a daffodil sky."

"Next day, as they gazed from the drawing-room window out through the distant wreath of trees toward a sea of Mediterranean blue, with rosy capes beyond, the down on the left rising above the foreground of undulating park, golden-leaved elms and chestnuts, and red-stemmed pines, they agreed," says their son, "that they must, if possible, have that view to live with."

Tennyson had just begun to taste the honey of prosperity after a long delay which had kept him waiting ten years or more for means to marry on, and as if to justify what he thought might be regarded as an extravagance, he wrote: "By buying safe debentures in the East Lincolnshire Line for £2,500, with that and £500 a year" (the amount which since 1850 he had been making from his books), "I think we ought to get on."

So they rapturously settled down to a country life. "In the afternoons they swept up the leaves, mowed the grass, gravelled the walks, and he built what he called 'a bower of rushes' in the kitchen garden. The primroses and snowdrops and other flowers were a constant delight, and he began a flower diction-

ary. He also bought spy-glasses through which he might watch the ways and movements of the birds in the ilexes, cedar, and fir trees. Geology, too, he took up, and trudged out with the local geologist, Keeping, on many a long expedition."

They made Farringford their home for forty years, and many of his best-known poems, including "Enoch Arden" and "Maud," were written there, though before the close of his life, to escape the intrusive cockneys whom he despised, he built Aldworth, a more lordly pleasure-house near Haslemere, where a part of each year was spent.

First leased, Farringford was bought three years later with the proceeds of the sale of "Maud," and his wife wrote on April 24, 1856: "This ivied home among the pine trees is ours. . . . Such beautiful blue hyacinths, orchises, primroses, daisies, marsh-marigolds and cuckoo flowers! Wild-cherry trees, too, with single snowy blossom, and the hawthorns, white with their 'pearls of May.' The park has for many days been rich with cowslips and furze in bloom. The elms are a golden wreath at the foot of the down; to the north of the house the mespilus and horse-chestnut are in flower, and the apple trees are covered with rosy buds. A. dug the bed ready for the rhododendrons. A thrush was singing among the nightingales and other birds, as he said 'mad with joy.' At sunset, the golden green of the trees, the burning splendor of Blackgang Chine and St. Catharine's and the red bank of the primeval river, contrasted with the turkis-blue of the sea (that is our view from the drawing-room), make altogether a miracle of beauty. We are glad that Farringford is ours."

One of the earliest signs of dissatisfaction occurs in a note to the Duke of Argyll, written from Haslemere, in 1867: "My wife has always had a fancy for the sandy soil and heather-scented air of this part of England, and we are intending to buy a few acres, and build a little home here, whither we may escape when the cockneys are running over my lawns at Freshwater."

The "few acres" expanded into several hundred and the little home into a palace.

Though many changes have taken place since 1853, the Isle of Wight is far from being wholly spoiled, and it is less changed at Freshwater and Farringford, which are to all intents and purposes one village, than elsewhere, the access to them being less convenient and less speedy than to other parts.

The island is very small—so small that Tennyson seeing it from Bournemouth with its white cliffs and encircling sea, could say of it that it looked like a water lily in a blue lake. Twenty-two miles from east to west, and thirteen from north to south, it is separated from the mainland by the Sound of Spithead and the Solent, beyond which, like luminous clouds, roll the chalk bluffs of the Hampshire downs.

On the north it is low and woody. There Osborne is embowered, and Cowes sits with its fleet of yachts dancing on an amethystine flood. The interior is undulating and the hills are often bare, though the valleys are grooved with typical English lanes and set with old-time homesteads and manorial parks. It is on the south, where it drops into the sea, that the island is most beautiful. There it faces the English Channel, with a bastion of magnificent chalk cliffs, which slope inland with wide reaches of treck as but flower-bestrewn downs, over which one walks as on an elastic cushion, breathing air “worth sixpence a pint,” as Tennyson, quoting Keats, once said of it.

At the eastern end, Reculver Cliff juts into the sea, and westward of it Sandown, Shanklin, and Ventnor, prosperous watering places, are strung along the shore, their architectural temporalities of red brick and stucco making a regretful contrast with the crouching, thatched, rose-enwreathed cottages of earlier days, which were their nucleus, and their piers streaking the sky at night with the lambent flame of electric lights. The brown-earthly mass of Dunnose Head flanks Shanklin on the west, and thence to Blackgang Chine extends the famous undercliff, which might better be called the overcliff—a great natural terrace high above the rustling surges and the lower roads, which was formed in the unrecorded past by the seaward slipping of the upper strata. Along the undercliff the foliage gushes out like a green waterfall; houses, gardens, and hedges are masses of bloom, and wherever there is an opening the sea shows itself like turquoise glass in a painted window. Bonchurch, loveliest of English villages, with its ancient church that could be put into the chancel of an ordinary chapel, and its many literary associations (John Sterling is buried in the gardenlike graveyard), suns itself peacefully here, and until Blackgang Chine is reached the scene is comparable to that of the Riviera, which, in its blending of water and woodland, it much resembles.

The Chine is a chasm with variegated walls of chalk and sandstone, above which the undercliff ends, and then an embayed stretch of low, wind-swept moor opens to the westward, rising again to the height of Afton and Freshwater downs, which sloping inland front the sea with some of the noblest cliffs in the island, or for that matter in the world.

In the distance they glimmer like icebergs or promontories in a mirage, and sometimes seem to be caught up and mingled with the clouds. In the gray they glow with pale phosphorescent flame. Nearer, as from the sea, their blanched escarpments are fringed around the summits with brown tassels from the washings of the earth above, and veilings of moss and grass. There is a gap between Afton Down and Freshwater with a beach and a village sheltered in it—the village of Freshwater itself—and beyond it the cliffs soar to their loftiest point, where they open out to St. Alban's Head and Portland Bill, and are crowned by Tennyson's beacon, the memorial of the poet who made the ground his own and gave voices to its sea and heather, its gorse and sky.

Tennyson said, "Somehow water is the element I love best of all four," but in the recent *Memoir* he is also credited with saying that he "never cared greatly for the sea on the south coast. "It is not a grand sea, only an angry, curt sea."

Probably that was a view expressed before he became familiar with the locality, for though the Atlantic does not plunge against the Isle of Wight as against Cornwall and the West of Ireland, he himself has proved how much power and enchantment the sea reveals from the downs. Let the weather be fair or foul, Nature is never dull from the vantage-ground of those convexities which seem like the rind of the earth and give an illusion of vastness and openness beyond their actual area. Men striding on ridges and etched against the sky indeed seem "as trees walking." The wind rustling in the ear, the sheep bleating, the sea churning among the boulders, the occasional bellowing of a steamer for a pilot, the swallows crying in their low flights and the gulls screaming give the only sounds. When the mist closes over the scene, a strange sense of being disembodied possesses us as we are lost in the impenetrable vapor, and the gulls pass over our heads, visible but for an instant as they float from obscurity into obscurity. In times of storm one seems to be at the seat of the elements and a

witness to all their processes. The clouds roll and break against the cliffs like another sea, and sunbursts flashing from them leave a silver swath over the vexed and sombre billows. On sultry days a waterspout, whirling like a dervish, is no uncommon sight, and he who makes the downs his observatory becomes wise in all the phenomena of sea and air. Climbing them at night gives one the feeling of scaling the walls of heaven itself; they slope like the sides of a pyramid, and the apex of the pyramid impales the stars. On sunny days the sea below is purple and every shade of blue and green that can be thought of, even (to use one of Tennyson's own descriptions) "like a peacock's neck."

Rarely was there a visitor at Farringford that he was not brought up to the beacon, and shown all these wonders and beauties. Except in his closing years, the poet was found upon them in all weathers and at all seasons, and from them and the surrounding scenery he drew many of the landscapes of his poems.

I have seen a picture of him standing on such a summit as High Down, where the beacon is, as an illustration to "Break, break," but those lines were not inspired or written there; they were written in a Lincolnshire lane, at five o'clock in the morning, between blossoming hedges. He left a definite record in regard to "Maud," however, and says, "Many of the descriptions of Nature are taken from observations of natural phenomena at Farringford, although the localities in the poem are all imaginary." He observed not merely with the eye of a poet, but as a man of wide scientific knowledge, and he had much more than a fair acquaintance with geology, botany, and astronomy. Flowers and birds were the burden of much of his talk in his rambles, and he was constantly making notes. "I generally take my nature-similes direct from my own observation of nature, and sometimes jot them down, and if by chance I find that one of my similes is like that in any author my impulse is not to use that simile." His son adds that if he was in the vein during a walk he would make dozens of similes that were never chronicled.

His walks were usually along the downs towards the Needles, those picturesque spikes of chalk which have been lopped off the cliffs at the entrance to the Solent, and from which vessels leaving Southampton take their departure. "The birds that made their homes on the chalk ledges, the peregrine falcons, the

ravens with their 'iron knell,' the kestrels, the carrion-crows, the different kinds of sea birds, from the cormorants drying themselves on the pinnacles of rock in heraldic attitudes, to the seagull sunning himself among the tufts of samphire and of thrift, were ever a fresh interest. A special corner that he liked above all was a platform over Scratchall's Bay looking up to a dazzling white precipice seen far away by ships at sea, which he named Taliessin or 'the splendid brow.' At other times he would wander at low tide among the green rock pools on the shore and curiously examine the 'branching seaweed' and the brilliant sea anemones; or, when high tide coincided with sunset, would watch the great waves flinging their 'rosy veil of spray' behind them and 'shouldering the sun.'"

"The madden'd beach dragg'd down by the wave," "the spirits of wild sea-smoke," "the vast sea-cataracts," "the gray skirts of a lifting squall," and many other vivid illustrations were drawn from the downs.

Rain and wind did not restrain him, and he scorned an umbrella. With his long, dark mantle and thick boots and huge wide-awake hat he defied all storms. When Mary Anderson was tramping with him and his hat became soaked, he stopped and shook it, saying, "How much better this is than to be huddled over the fire for a little weather!"

Sometimes his two boys were harnessed to their mother's bath chair when she was an invalid, and the poet pushing behind she too was given glimpses of the swelling downs that were so rich a source of inspiration and delight to him.

The house is so completely shut in by its groves that even from the ridge of the downs nothing can be seen of it, and the curling blue smoke rising over the trees alone indicates its existence. The straggling village rambles down to the shingly beach by a lane of hawthorn hedges, and is flanked by the pale cliffs, which, as at the Needles, have cast off fragments in the form of pillars and arches with their bases in the sea. The roses in the gardens of the nearer cottages have nothing between them and the surf but a narrow bench of pebbles. Many ugly little houses have sprung up, and, like parvenu neighbors, elbow and tower above the earlier and prettier habitations. But the crescents and terraces feared by Tennyson have not yet come, and Freshwater impresses those who are seeking

the gayeties of the ordinary watering-place as being stagnant and boresome.

The journey from London turns one's thoughts towards eternity. There are expresses as far as Brockenhurst, but there the traveller for the Isle of Wight is shunted on to a branch line, and the rest of the distance is through a country of crabs and tortoises. The train takes a nap of fifteen minutes at Lymington Town, and then softly steals on a quarter of a mile to Lymington Pier, where ancient mariners, who only need pigtails to connect them with Trafalgar, transfer you and your baggage to a prehistoric boat, which creeps across the Solent on the tips of its toes and cautiously lands you at Yarmouth. Still you are far away from Freshwater, reckoning by the clock. Octogenarian porters smile at you and your "boxes," and then have a good, long chat among themselves and with the boat's crew. Later—never sooner—perhaps in the course of an hour, the coach is ready to start, but never until the purple-faced, husky-voiced half-brother of old Weller has had his "drop," and used up all his resources of conversation with the octogenarians. When the coach starts it stops, and starts to stop again to deliver a cabbage here, a newspaper there, a baby half-way down the lane, somebody's "washing" at the end of the lane, a soldier at the path to the fort, and a voluminous old lady with a tin hat-box and ten or a dozen bursting paper parcels at the gate of one of the many little houses with "apartments" in the window. When you reach Freshwater the day is done and you feel that Switzerland might have been nearer.

What Mr. Gosse said of the poet himself in the last number of the *REVIEW* could be applied, if one were disposed to sarcasm, to the natives, and especially to the men. They have "a singular slowness of progression," and a sort of "premonition of great length of days" makes them very lazy. They are grave and slow, and speak with the rising inflection of the Hampshire dialect. They look after their skiffs and canoes and bathing-houses, and brood by the hour on the sorrows of the sea, solacing themselves with their frequent "drops" at the tap of the "Albion," while their wives and daughters attend to the needs of the summer visitors. In earlier days Tennyson and some of his famous visitors were not above dropping in to this cottage or that for a chat and a pipe with the humble neighbors, and more than one modest dwelling is adorned by Mr. Cameron's photographs of the poet

and his friends, even by that celebrated one of Tennyson himself, which he called "the dirty monk."

"Ah, there do be this, and there do be that," the beachmen will say with solemn faces. Sometimes in calm summer evenings, when the sea is lacquered with bronze and without a ripple, it breaks on the beach and against the cliffs with the crash of falling masonry, while at Compton Bay it has the constant roar of a cataract, though the surface is as smooth as oil. Pausing between the hedgerows, we were listening to this thunder and its reverberations, when an old beachman shook his head: "Ah, when she do roar like that, changes be coomin'." Tennyson records the effect in the line, "There came so loud a calling of the sea," and that calling can be heard far into the interior of the island.

The house is invisible from the road as well as from the cliffs, and to see it one must either be invited or become a trespasser. Tennyson's Lane is the nearest approach to it, a glade separating the home park from outlying meadows, and from a gate here one can gaze on the same prospect which opens from the drawing-room window, and which Tennyson called "his bit of Italy." In the far distance are the buttresses of the undercliff, blending in the haze with billowy clouds; nearer, the intervening pale-green moor and the dells, which shelter such ideal villages as Brightstone or Brixton, where Ken and Wilberforce once preached; then the red and gold cliffs of Atherfield Point melt into the bluish white of Compton Bay and the yellow-fringed precipices of Freshwater Gate. All of these lie beyond a foreground of meadow, edged by tall, graceful cedars, and all dip into a sea, changeable, but as constant blue as any sea can be.

A narrow rustic bridge spans the lane, and this gave the poet access to Maiden's Croft and the little summer house, where "Maud," "Enoch Arden," "The Holy Grail," and many others of his poems were written, and where, in his closing days, he could see the downs when he was too feeble to climb them.

The estate is not of many acres and the house is plain, but a poet lived there as a poet should. His son has given a picture of him which can never fade, so vivid is it and so charged with appeal to the loftiest and most enduring of human interests. He has revealed to us not only a poet, but a great and most lovable man in a struggle with the problems that beset and harass the

soul. Any curiosity not ignoble cannot fail to be satisfied with the opulence of detail which the son employs in depicting his father, and hereafter all pilgrims who come to Freshwater for their interest in the poet will have, through the biography, the new privilege of seeing him not as a stranger from afar, nor as the dim, illusive figure that shunned observation, but as an intimate.

The book fills the mind with pictures of him and the long roll of illustrious friends who visited him at Farringford—Darwin, Gladstone, Kingsley, Sumner, Dufferin, Garibaldi, Swinburne, Millais, Owen, Newman, Longfellow, Maurice, Tyn-dall, Holmes, Bayard Taylor, Prince Albert, and Jenny Lind.

We see him star-gazing from the roof of the house, and we hear his infant son asking, in childish bewilderment, "Am I dead?" as he is held out in the darkness to look at a comet. When Darwin is leaving after a call the poet says, "Your theory of evolution does not make against Christianity," and the man of science replies, "Certainly not." We see and hear him reading his poems to special friends ("Maud" oftener than anything else), slow and unwilling at the outset, but once started voluble and ready to keep on until midnight. Once when he is reciting "Maud" he turns upon a listener and asks what birds are meant by the line, "Birds in the high hall garden calling 'Maud,' 'Maud,' 'Maud.'" "Nightingales, sir," is the timid answer. "Pooh, what a cockney you are! Nightingales do not say 'Maud.' Rooks do, or something like it, 'caw, caw, caw.'"

He can be brusque at times—almost as savage as his friend Carlyle—but the disclosure of his foibles leaves him more human and not less lovable. He has a lively tussle with George Eliot on mind and matter, and as they part he smilingly says, "I wish you well with your molecules," and she as gently replies, "I can get on very well with my molecules."

There is an amusing story of his meeting some children in one of the Freshwater lanes. Expecting to amuse them, he stopped before them and barked like a dog, but the children could not see the intended humor and only responded with long faces and alarm. He was scornfully indifferent to superficial appearances, especially to his personal appearance. On one occasion, when William Allingham was visiting him and they

were holding a candle over some books or pictures, Tennyson's hair caught fire and Allingham attempted to put it out. "O, never mind," said the poet, "it depends on chance burnings."

"One of the finest-looking men in the world," said Carlyle of him to Emerson. "A great shock of rough, dusky-dark hair, bright, laughing, hazel eyes, massive aquiline face, most massive yet most delicate; of sallow-brown complexion, almost Indian-looking; clothes cynically loose, free-and-easy; smokes infinite tobacco." He had a study, bare except for books, at the top of the house, and to this den the chosen few were invited. Tyn-dall found between fifteen and twenty pipes in the rack over the chimney, and the drawers of the table were crammed with tobacco of various kinds. "With few words, with many or with none, it need not be an ineloquent pipe," said Carlyle. And up here the poet would unbosom himself of the many interests that filled his mind, a mind of extraordinary variousness. Here, said Palgrave, one felt, was a man who, like Wordsworth, had lived, not indeed exclusively, but essentially, among the highest mountains, the purest air, the region nearest heaven.

Tennyson died at Aldsworth, not at Freshwater, but it was at Farringford that, when the end was nearing, he wrote "Crossing the Bar," and it was the moaning of the sea there that inspired it. He explained the pilot as meaning "that Divine and Unseen Who is always guiding us," and a few days before his death he said to his son, "Mind you put 'Crossing the Bar' at the end of all editions of my poems."

WILLIAM H. RIDEING.